

History of Health Status in Alaska

The history of health status in Alaska involves the parallel stories of the indigenous peoples who originally lived in Alaska and of the explorers and settlers who came from other locations.

The health of the indigenous peoples of Alaska was not always good prior to contact with Western civilization, but the arrival of Europeans in Alaska added new health problems. The newcomers brought violence and cruelty, as well as alcohol and tobacco. However, the infectious diseases, to which the Alaska Natives had no immunity, were the most deadly; smallpox, syphilis, influenza, measles and tuberculosis killed so many Alaska Natives that by 1900, there were fears of extinction of the Alaska Native populations.¹ Settlers and explorers themselves dealt with scurvy, injuries, lack of fresh food, hard labor and alcoholism.

In the 1950s the discrepancy in health status between Alaska Natives and non-Natives became apparent due to a report commissioned by the Department of the Interior.² The 1954 Parran report detailed the entire health program of the Alaska territory, with special attention to tuberculosis. The report stated the following:

“...‘Native Alaska’... and ‘White Alaska’ ..represent extremes in the health status of their citizens. White Alaska, with a relatively young, vigorous, generally urbanized population, shows a record of life-expectancy as favorable as that in the majority of the states. Its problems are those of every new and growing country....In tragic contrast, the indigenous peoples of Native Alaska are the victims of sickness, crippling conditions and premature deaths to a degree exceeded in very few parts of the world. Among them, health problems are nearly out of hand. If other Americans could see for themselves the large numbers of the tuberculous, the crippled, the blind, the deaf, the malnourished, the desperately ill among a relatively small population, private generosity would dispatch shiploads of food and clothing for Alaska, alongside the cargoes setting out for Korea; doctors and nurses would be mobilized and equipped with the urgency of great hospital units in wartime; the Alaska missions would not need to beg for support.”²

The report was instrumental in improving care of Alaska Natives with tuberculosis, including the building of the Alaska Native Medical Center, the movement of the Indian Health Service to the Public Health Service from the Department of the Interior, and the beginning of drug treatment for tuberculosis both in hospitals and in home settings.³

Since the 1950s, health status has improved among both Alaska Natives and non-Natives, but the most dramatic improvements have been among Alaska Natives (Table A).

Table A: Changes in Health Status Among Alaskans

		Alaska Natives	Non-Natives
% of deaths caused by infectious diseases	1950 ⁴	46%	3%
	1980-89 ⁴	1.3%	1%
Life expectancy at birth (years)	1950 ⁴	47	66
	1994-98 ⁵	69.4	75.7 (whites)
Infant mortality (deaths per 1000 live births)	1950 ²	101	24
	1994-98 ⁵	10.4	5.9 (whites)

Infectious diseases are no longer a major cause of death among Alaska Natives. Life expectancy at birth has increased 22 years among Alaska Natives and 10 years among non-Natives. Infant mortality has decreased almost 10-fold among Alaska Natives, and about 4-fold among non-Natives.

The improvement in health status in Alaska during the past several decades occurred largely through the public health efforts of improved sanitation, treatment for tuberculosis and other infectious diseases and immunizations.

Despite the improvements, health disparities still exist in Alaska. Differences in health status are found between rural and urban Alaskans, between the poor and the

more affluent, between males and females, and among racial and ethnic groups. One of the major goals of Healthy People 2000 is to “reduce health disparities among Americans.”⁶ We need to develop approaches to narrow the health gaps and improve the health and well being of all Alaskans.

Continued vigilance is needed to prevent and control infectious diseases. In addition, we need to address the new noninfectious “major killers”: cancer, heart disease and injuries. These “major killers” affect all Alaskans, rural and urban, Native and non-Native, males and females. Prevention and the wider implementation of healthy lifestyles could prevent many premature deaths and disabling events.

An estimated 50% of deaths in the United States could be prevented through the adoption of healthier lifestyles.⁷ Smoking, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, alcohol abuse, inappropriate use of firearms and lack of safety precautions contribute to many of the preventable causes of death.

References

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